The Diversity Of Early Christianity | From Jesus To Christ - The First Christians | FRONTLINE

From the beginning, early Christians struggled to define for themselves the identity of Jesus and the meaning of his message.

Harold W. Attridge:

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BOOK OF ACTS ACCOUNT TOO SIMPLE

What is the account that we get from Acts about the early history of the Christian church?

The Book of Acts records or reports that there was a special event that took place at Pentecost, which would have been the next pilgrimage festival after the Passover at which Jesus died. And at that time the disciples of Jesus were gathered together in Jerusalem unsure of what their future would be, when all of a sudden the spirit took hold of them and enabled them to speak in tongues, and that speaking of tongues is understood by the author of the Book of Acts to mean speaking in all of the languages of the world. So with the power of the spirit behind them, the disciples of Jesus immediately began a missionary campaign and started bringing people into the fold, converting them to belief in Christ. And from that time forward the mission moved ahead in the rather smooth way, directed by the spirit and by all of the apostles who acted in concert with one another and agreement with one another. That's the picture that we get in Acts.

The historical reality is probably much more complex. The Christian movement probably began not from a single center but from many different centers where different groups of disciples of Jesus gathered and tried to make sense of what they had experienced with him and what had happened to him at the end of his public ministry. Each of those groups probably had a very different take on what the significance of Jesus was. Some of them understanding his death and the resurrection experience, if they focused on it, in terms of exaltation. Others understanding it in terms of a resuscitation of the corpse of Jesus, others not

worrying very much at all about the resurrection of Jesus, but concentrating on his teaching and trying to propagate that. We can see, even in the canonical text, in the Book of Acts, that there were different groups that were in competition with one another. Those who insisted more strongly on observance of Jewish laws in the Torah competed with those who were more open to admission of gentiles without imposing the burden of the Torah on them. There were others who we meet again in the Book of Acts, who apparently stood in continuity with the activity of John the Baptist and did not know the baptism that the Pauline Christians, at least, knew. So there was much more diversity in the early stages of the Christian movement than the Book of Acts suggest....

Holland Lee Hendrix:

President of the Faculty Union Theological Seminary

EARLY "CHRISTIANITIES" OF THE 2ND AND 3RD CENTURIES

Christianity, or one would rather say "Christianities," of the second and third centuries were a highly variegated phenomenon. We really can't imagine Christianity as a unified coherent religious movement. Certainly there were some religious organizations.... There were institutions developing in some Christian churches, but only in some. And this was not universal by any means. We know from, for example, the literature recovered at Nag Hammadi, that gnostic Christianity didn't have the kind of clear hierarchy that other forms of Christianity had developed. They still clung to a charismatic leadership model. And so there was a lot of variety in 2nd and 3rd century Christianity....

There were very different views of Jesus in the various types of Christianity.... Perhaps the starkest contrast was among those who considered themselves as gnostic Christians, and those who considered themselves Christians in the old Pauline view of things. On the one hand, Paul, and Pauline Christianity, would have placed all of the emphasis on Jesus' death and resurrection, and the saving power of that death and resurrection. Gnostic Christianity, on the other hand, would have placed its prime emphasis on the message, the wisdom, the knowledge, the gnosis, that's where the word gnostic comes from, the Greek word for knowledge, the knowledge that Jesus transmits, and even the secret knowledge that Jesus transmits. So one would have on the one hand faith in the saving event of Jesus' life and death, and on the other hand knowledge as the great source of adherence to the Jesus movement on the other hand.

More on the gnostics.

Helmut Koester:

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DIVERSITY IN EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

> *With this explosive spread of Christian churches... it cannot be expected that everywhere, everybody was doing and believing the same thing.*

Christianity did not start out as a unified movement. We have to remember that the disciples were probably dispersed at a very early time.... That is, at a time where there was no fixed formulation what the set of Christian beliefs should be. What Christian rituals should be. What they should think about Jesus or what they should tell about Jesus. The sources that we have tell us that Christianity started as a very diverse movement, as the founding of churches... moved into very different cultural and language contexts....

Paul's conversion as an apostle to the gentiles may date as early as three years after Jesus' death. No later than the year 35, but probably already 32 or 33.... He was in Damascus when he was called, according to his own witness. So we have, already, within two years or three or five years, of Jesus' death probably Greek speaking communities outside of Palestine, very early in Antioch, but we have also the founding of communities in Samaria.... We have apparently more isolated Christian communities founded very early in Galilee. Paul's mission carried Christianity all the way over Asia Minor, present Turkey into Macedonia, into Greece, within 20 years. And at the end of that period, Paul already knows that there's a Christian community in Rome which he has not founded.

With this explosive spread of Christian churches, not a very slow moderate growth, getting a few new members every few years, but an explosive spread of this movement, it cannot be expected that everywhere, everybody was doing and believing the same thing, singing the same hymns and reading the same scriptures and telling the same story. So we have a beginning with great diversity, and the slow process, particularly in the second century, to establish a greater unity among the very diverse churches. Already a process in Paul's churches themselves, because that's why Paul writes letters, because he wants to make sure that these newly converted Christians in Ephesus and Philippi and Thessaloniki and in Corinth have some unanimity in their beliefs. And his work is made even more difficult because once he had left Corinth, some people came to Corinth and told them, "Really Paul has not told you enough of the deep wisdom of the words of Jesus. Those you have to contemplate in order to learn the wisdom that comes from Jesus," and Paul has to write back and say, "Now, I taught you nothing but Christ crucified, not Christ wisdom." So you get a conflict of different traditions also at a very early stage.

WE CAN LEARN FROM THE STRUGGLES OF THE EARLY CHURCH

One interesting problem is simply the experience of diversity. We sometimes think that it's just such a shame that we have so many Christian denominations and so many other religions all in one country. "Wouldn't it be great if we have only one belief and one religion as it was in the time of the early Christians?" No, it wasn't in the time of the early Christians. The early Christians had a hard time to discuss with each other, fight with each other to establish certain patterns and criteria for the organization of community, what was important in the churches. Was it indeed important that churches established mutual responsibility for each other and care for the poor as part of their dossier? This is what they're supposed to do. And that discussion in our church was very helpful twelve years ago, when we discussed whether we should open a shelter for homeless people in the basement of our church.

But the other aspect is the diversity of religious movements. And that in fact early Christianity, by moving into different realms of the different universes of thought and of religion in the Greco-Roman world, adopted a lot of concepts from other religions, lots of them pagan religions, which enriched the early Christian movement tremendously. This probably should encourage us to say that our discourse, not only inner Christian discourse with other denominations, but also our discourse with other religions, with the Jews, with Moslems, with Buddhists, may in fact, indeed be very fruitful..., rather than staying away from this and

saying, "Oh God, now we have even more Muslims in America than we have Jews." Which some people find terrible. But they have to learn to say "maybe that is very good."

L. Michael White:

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REGIONAL DIVERSITY

We tend to think of the success of Christianity in the second and third centuries just on the eve on really when it becomes the prominent religion in the Roman Empire as if it were just one form of religiosity, when in fact the opposite is true. Christianity was extremely diverse during this period, and we probably ought to think of it as a kind of regional diversity; that is, the Christianity of Rome was different than Christianity in North Africa in certain ways, and that was different from what we find in Egypt, and that different from what we find in Syria or back in Palestine. We have, in effect, different brands of Christianity living often side by side, even in the same city. So, it's a great deal of diversity.

At one point in Rome,... Justin Martyr has his Christian school in one part of the city, and the gnostic teacher Valentinus is in another school in Rome, and another so-called heretic by the name of Marcion is also in Rome just down the street somewhere. All of these along side of the official papal tradition that developed as part of St. Peter's See in Rome, all there together. So, even within one city, we can have great diversity.

Now, what's significant about this diversity is the fact that each form of Christian tradition tended to tell the story of Jesus in different ways. The image of Jesus for Justin Martyr is rather different than that that we see for Valentinus or Marcion or others as well. And this is especially true even in other parts of the empire. This is where we start to see a kind of proliferation of gospels ... all over the empire, and by the third and early fourth century [more] than you can actually count, and certainly more than you can easily read within a bible.

Wayne A. Meeks:

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INTERNAL SCHISMS AND THE DRIVE FOR UNITY

Now, the early Christians put a great emphasis upon unity amongst one another, and the odd thing is they seemed always to have been squabbling with one another over what kind of unity they were to have. The earliest documents we have are Paul's letters and what do we find there? He is, ever and again, having defend himself against some other Christians who have come in and said, "No, Paul didn't tell it right. We have now to tell you the real thing." So, it is clear from the very beginning of Christianity, that there are different ways of interpreting the fundamental message. There are different kinds of practice; there are arguments over how Jewish are we to be; how Greek are we to be; how do we adapt to the surrounding culture - what is the real meaning of the death of Jesus, how important is the death of Jesus? Maybe it's the sayings of Jesus that are really the important thing and not his death and not his resurrection.

Now, this runs very contrary to the view… which the mainstream Christianity has always quite understandably wanted to convey. That is, that at the beginning, everything was unity, everything was clear, everything was understandable and only gradually, under outside influences, heresies arose and conflict resulted, so that we must get back somehow to that Golden Age, when everything was okay. One of the most difficult things which has emerged from modern historical scholarship, is precisely that that Golden Age eludes us. The harder we work to try to arrive at that first place where Christianity, were all one and everything was clear, the more it… seems a will-o'- the-wisp. There never was this pure Christianity, different from everybody else and clear, in its contours….

How did these squabbles unfold over time?

The interesting thing about Christianity is that you have diversity from the beginning, and each of the diverse groups feel so keenly about their way of of seeing things that obviously, they'd like everybody else to agree with them…. There seems to be a sense, [among] all of the various parties that somehow, it ought to be one group; it ought to be one people. Obviously, they inherit this from Judaism, the notion that there is one people of God, … and yet, they're not one, they're different on all kinds of of things. And the drive to obtain the truth and to manifest the truth is so strong that if one group cannot convince the others that their way is right, often times, it seems the only thing they can do is separate, to make sure that the truth is embodied somewhere. And so the very drive for unity produces schism, and… quite ironically, the very existence of all the different schisms is testimony to the sense that there ought to be unity.

…The notion of Orthodoxy, which is only the flip-side of the notion of heresy,

[developed in the second century]. So heresy which... simply means [in Greek], a choice, and is most commonly used to talk about a philosophical school, now takes on a negative connotation for the Christians. [It] first of all implies a schismatic group, a choice, which is different from the mainstream,... and then secondarily, [implies] people have wrong ideas, people who think wrongly about this or that, notably about the identity of Jesus Christ. The other side of that, of course, is our side, which has orthodoxy, that is, right thinking. The great controversies of the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries, which create what we will know as orthodoxy, and in the west, Catholicism, emerge from this very drive to create a a unified body of opinion.

It sounds like these early Christians are having big turf wars over who gets to say what Christianity is all about.

Yes. Well, the early Christians did have turf wars over who had it right and you see this from the very beginning. The Apostle Paul and his opponents in Galatia, who say, "Wait a minute, Paul told you a very simplified gospel, it makes it easy for you to become a member of this new group, but we know, after all, that if you're really going to be a real Christian, first you have to be a real Jew and that means, you have to be circumcised and you have to keep certain regulations out of the Torah. So Paul has not got it right." Paul said, "No, you don't understand how radically new this thing is, which God is doing here." [And] again in Corinth, people come and say, "No no, you don't understand, Paul isn't really quite what he claims to be here and now we're here to put it right." So, from the very beginning, it seems Christianity has different ways of construing what it's all about, which will lead to divisions and lead to conflict.

Bishops holding books (catacomb painting)

Who wins?

Who wins - in some sense, nobody wins, in the sense that the result of this is schisms and ultimately, some very nasty things in the history of the church, eventually the use of force and violence.... History is always written by the victors;

if one wanted to be very cynical about it, one would say "All right, the people who finally managed the most power and the most persuasive abilities win out and they write the history, which defines everybody else as a heretic." and one would have to say there's a great deal of truth in that. [On] the other side of it... is that who wins, finally, is the side that embodies the widest support of people [for] their way of symbolizing Christian truth, and so there's there's a kind of strange democracy involved here. Obviously distorted by imperial power from the 4th century on but nevertheless, a strange kind of democracy involved... It is the usage of the local churches that eventually determines which books will be included in the New Testament, for example, and which will not be included, which point of view about Jesus has the widest support and therefore will also gain political power because there are people in various places that support that. It's a very complicated picture, obviously.

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